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"Nay!" said the emperor, "while you are with me you have nothing to fear, and may smoke if you please."

"Are you then some great boyard, that I am safe under your protection?" returned the young man, smiling.

"I have some slight influence," said the emperor, "and what influence I do possess I will exert on your behalf."

"Thanks! thanks!"

The young man puffed away once more, and putting his arm familiarly within the proffered arm of the emperor, they marched on, talking cheerfully enough. "The stranger expressed his opinion freely on all topics connected with Russian trade and commerce. He did not appear to notice the striking resemblance that the imperial portraits—and in St. Petersburg the imperial portraits are everywhere—bore to his good-tempered friend; but when he at last arrived at one of the military districts, and here and there a soldier saluted as they went, the truth came into his mind, the cigar was cast away, a deep flush suffused his cheeks, and taking his arm from the emperor, he said—

"Pardon me, sire—I am but a poor foreigner; yet is it not the mighty Czar with whom I have the honour of speaking?"

"The same; but reassure yourself of my good-will. It is not always an emperor is strolling the streets to come to the relief of uninformed strangers who may infringe the police regulations. Your cigar has gained you a friend; it might have gained you three days' imprisonment, or a fine of fifty kopecs. To make all sure for the future, I will give you a passport with my own hand; and, depend upon it, you will get on far better when the postmasters and the rest recognise in you a friend of the emperor!"

The portrait of the emperor, we before remarked, is to be found everywhere in Russia. In the noblest dwellings it looks down upon you in glowing colours from its golden frame, and

in humble homes it confronts the visitor in the shape of a common print on a bare wall. Everything connected with the emperor is held in the highest esteem—his will, absolute, is respected by all throughout the vast extent of his empire. A traveller relates that he was journeying on a very bad road from one Russian town to another, and that as time was important, seeing that he had despatches for the French government, he urged his postillion or driver to do his utmost in the way of speed. But the driver, a stolid, uncompromising man, still proceeded at a leisurely pace, and, despite every remonstrance, would not urge his horses—"little doves," as he called them—into a good round pace. On arriving at one of the post-houses, our traveller urged his complaint; it was listened to with the utmost carelessness, till the passport was produced, and in the handwriting of the emperor appeared the name of the Czar.

At sight of this, the postmaster fell on his knees and implored pardon; the coachman swore that he would drive like lightning for the emperor, and, instead of indifference and inattention, there was the utmost promptitude and despatch.

It is said that the utmost enthusiasm prevails on behalf of the policy of the Czar—that the people not only fear his name and regard sacred his behests, but really enter into his schemes of aggrandisement. This seems scarcely likely of the mass of the people. As for those who may long for the possession of luxurious Byzantium and the sunlit shores of the Bosphorus, they know well enough that it is something far different from zeal for the Greek Church which induces Nicholas to engage in Turkish warfare—that it is but a noisy echo, thundered forth by imperial artillery, of the words of the late Emperor Alexander:—"Whilst we do not possess the Dardanelles, we are without the key of our own house: Russia must have Constantinople!"

THE SACRED DEBT.

FIRST PART.

AFTER the toils of the day were over, four students of a small German university met, as they were accustomed to do, at the apartments of one of their number for the performance of music. It is well known with what enthusiasm music is cultivated by the Germans. The majority of them possess a natural taste for this art, of which they are so fond; and the poor as well as the rich find in vocal or instrumental music a constant source of enjoyment. These young men, after their more serious studies, diverted themselves during the evening with playing quartettes composed for two violins, a viola, and a violoncello. During an interval of repose, their light, joyous conversation was interrupted by an old beggar, who, halting under the window, began to sing in a broken voice. He accompanied himself on a harp, which was too much injured by exposure to retain its more sonorous vibrations; nevertheless the accompaniment was soft and melodious, and the voice sweetly tremulous. The burden of his song ran thus:—

"Oh, give to poor Peter
A cottage, I cry,
An orchard around it,
His wants to supply.
Content with such riches,
Oh, think it not strange,
Estates with his highness
He would not exchange."

When he had concluded, he raised his eyes towards the window where stood the young men. One of them, throwing him a piece of money, said laughingly:

"Here, poor Peter, this is all we can do for you now; return some other time."

"Yes, in a year," said another.

"And we will give you sufficient to purchase a cottage," said a third.

"In a little orchard," added the fourth.

The old man was struck motionless. The lamp over the

doorway of a neighbouring inn shed a pale light upon his long white hair. After a moment's reflection, he again raised his eyes to the window and said:

"Young men, are you serious in what you say to me? I hope you would not mock an old man."

"God forbid!" replied Ernest with emotion. His three companions also called God to witness.

"Well, young men, I trust you; at this same hour, a year hence, I will return to this window. Adieu! May the Almighty, whose name you have invoked, bless your undertakings!"

Having given utterance to this benediction, the old man departed. The students closed the window, and again took up their instruments. In a few moments, three had forgotten this little scene, and trifled as before; but at the close of the evening Ernest said to them,—

"You appear quite at ease; I must say I am not so, when I reflect on the promise I have made."

"What promise?" said the most heedless one.

"Why, the cottage and the orchard."

Their only reply was a shout of laughter, and thereupon the students separated.

The concerts were continued, and each time the friends met, Ernest reminded them of the promise made to the old man, but found that his zeal was most unwelcome.

"I am surprised," said he, "that you oblige me to insist upon a thing so self-evident. Either we have spoken seriously, and should act accordingly; or we have been guilty of impious mockery, and should endeavour to avenge for our fault. My friends, I shall not sleep peacefully until I have found means to discharge our sacred debt."

"How can we discharge it?" said Christopher; "our parents deprive themselves of necessities to furnish us with a pitiful maintenance; and even could we live upon air for six months, and unite our little income, it would not be sufficient

to purchase the most miserable hut and the smallest orchard for the old fool. If we have been to blame in promising, he has been equally so in accepting our promise. So, quits! Adieu, comrades! I wish your sleep may be as undisturbed as my own."

This fine reasoning could not convince Ernest, nor restore his peace of mind. His mother, noticing his thoughtfulness, became anxious. The good woman, who was a widow, had but this son, and, that they might not be separated, had accompanied him to the University town. The daughter of a peasant, and the wife of a village schoolmaster, poor Catherine had learnt to practise the most rigid economy, and hoped, by that means, to eke out the little sum which remained of her paternal inheritance, until her son could maintain himself and his mother.

She wished to know the cause of his sadness; and Ernest made the painful acknowledgment. He saw by his mother's serious look that she thought with him, that such a promise ought to be religiously kept. Indeed, his own judgment was the result of his mother's early instructions in the principles of honour and piety. And should she be untrue, when her son had thus shown himself faithful to her lessons? Catherine could not be guilty of the too common sin, of contradicting her words by her conduct.

"Alas! my child," said she with a sigh, "you have commenced life by incurring debts. Nevertheless, whatever your companions may do, you at least shall fulfil your part of the engagement into which you have entered; if you do not, you are not my son."

After this conversation, Ernest devoted all the time he could spare from study to devising some means of redeeming his promise. He was one day walking on the borders of a forest, absorbed in the contemplation of this subject, when he came upon a little cottage delightfully situated in a charming valley. The cottage was surrounded by a small orchard, now clad in the verdure of spring. Passing the rustic entrance, he perceived that it was for sale.

"This would suit our purpose," said he, gazing around.

Impelled by curiosity, he entered, and approached a man of middle age, who was seated on a bench formed from the trunk of a tree.

"Your farm is for sale, sir?" said he, colouring.

"Yes, my friend; do you wish to purchase it?"

"I am deputed," replied Ernest, hesitating, "to procure an estate for a friend. What may be the price you demand?"

"Two thousand florins (about £160)," was the reply.

"Two thousand florins!" exclaimed the poor young man in affright.

"It appears to you a high price, my friend; but do you expect a house and grounds are to be had for a morsel of bread? Look at these trees; their flourishing condition proves the goodness of the soil. Look at this house; it is not a castle certainly, but there is room enough for happiness within; and I would not leave the *Pré Fleuri*, were it not that I wish to be nearer my children, who have married far from hence."

"Yes, indeed," said the student to himself; "there is room enough for happiness. I should be well contented with it myself."

While he thus reflected, the man rose to conduct him to the house. After they had gone over it, they took a turn round the grounds. Ernest admired all he saw, and acknowledged that two thousand florins was only a reasonable demand for so eligible an estate.

He left the house, thinking it was something to have found the cottage and the orchard, and flattering himself that he should conclude by discovering the means to purchase them.

He was absorbed in these thoughts until he entered the town, when, meeting in the public gardens a troop of wandering musicians, he suddenly recollect that his friends expected him that evening to join their little concert. It was their first meeting after a fortnight's vacation, which they had passed at their respective homes.

They met at the usual hour, and after the first salutations,

Christopher said that he had something to tell them before they commenced.

"And I also," replied Augustus, "have something to say to you."

"Well, indeed," added Frederic, "and so have I."

"And when you have all finished," said Ernest, "I must beg you to listen to my tale."

Christopher began:

"I was crossing," said he, "the forests of the Hartz mountains, on my return home. I was alone, and on foot. As the night closed in, the weather became stormy. When I was in the middle of the wood, the tempest commenced. If I attempt to describe it to you, it must be chiefly from imagination, for I soon lost my presence of mind. The howling of the wind—the crash of falling trees—the torrents of rain and hail—were heard even above the incessant roaring of the thunder. The continual flashing of the lightning, bursting upon the profound darkness, so dazzled me, that I durst not open my eyes, nor proceed a step. Ah! friends, you know not what it is to be overtaken by a tempest in the midst of a forest. Hitherto I had fancied myself a brave man; now, I frankly confess, I know what terror is. I leant against a tree for support to my trembling limbs. Suddenly a thunderbolt fell a few steps from me, and struck an oak, which was instantly in flames. Here was new danger—the forest may soon be on fire. I gathered courage to move a little further on; but it was my last effort; I fell first upon my knees, and then my whole length upon the wet moss. There I passed the most dreadful night of my life. I thought of you, my friends, of our concerts, and of the old beggar. I said to myself: 'This is a warning from Heaven. Unhappy being that I am! If I escape this danger I will amend my life, and I will keep the promise that I made.' At length the storm abated, and I left the frightful wood; but, though the peril is over, the promise remains. This, my friends, is what I had to tell you; and I now join with the wise Ernest in entreating you to fulfil our engagement."

"You will have little difficulty in persuading me," said Augustus. "During my stay with my parents, I visited the Castle of Weissberg. The owner of that fine residence has adorned it with more curiosity than taste; and, perhaps, it would not repay the trouble of a visit, had he not also filled it with singular inventions. Among other things he has erected a magnificent triumphal arch in one of the principal walks, with this inscription over it in letters of gold:—'This is the gate of good faith; pass it not unless thou art true to thy word.' I was in a large company, one of whom read the inscription, and called our attention to it, upon which they all passed gaily on. Had I refused to pass, I should have stood an acknowledged liar. I therefore advanced boldly, and passed under the arch. Since that day I have had no peace of mind, for I feel that having pledged my honour before so many witnesses, I cannot withdraw."

"Then," said Frederic, "we are all agreed to comply with our comrade's request; for a circumstance no less singular than those you have related, has determined me to keep my word."

"Oh, my friends," he added, "when my grandmother used to relate to us her dreams and their predictions, we would laugh and shrug our shoulders behind her; but I am now as credulous as she was, and you will not be surprised at it when I tell you the dream that I had twice successively. I do not believe that Christopher felt more terror in the forest than I on my bed, when I saw, for the second time, the old musician stop in the street below, grinning and twanging the strings of his old harp. He suddenly grew to the height of the window, and putting in a dishevelled head, and stretching out a skeleton arm, he seized my violoncello, which became an enormous double-bass, opened it, I know not how, thrust me furiously into it, and carried me away with him upon his shoulders, notwithstanding your cries and my own. You may laugh as much as you please, but I am convinced that this beggar is some great personage, with power to punish us if we offend him. I will not expose myself to it, if I can but"

find the means of satisfying him ; but unhappily my dream revealed nothing on the point."

Ernest congratulated his comrades more upon the resolution they had formed than on the motives which had influenced them ; and added, " Let me now tell you, that I have found what we want."

" Ah, really !" cried they all in astonishment.

" Yes, I have found it. In a charming valley near the town, I discovered a little house standing in an orchard, which will suit us exactly, and our old man will no doubt be satisfied. The estate is to be sold for two thousand florins."

" Two thousand florins !" exclaimed they all together.

was time enough to pay when he was obliged ; and the third said, that his uncle, upon whom he depended, was violently enraged, and declared, if he should meet the beggar, he would denounce him to the police, and have him taken to prison."

" Then," said Ernest, " we are thrown upon our own resources ; and now for what I was about to propose to you. As I came through the public gardens, I met a troop of strolling musicians. They made noise enough, but their music was miserable ; however, the good people scattered money liberally among them. I flatter myself that we have a little more skill than they, and we have good instruments ; let us take advantage of the approaching vacation ; disguise



THE SACRED DEBT.

" I think," said Christopher, " we shall be a little nearer the conclusion of this affair when you have told us where we are to find the money : instead of this you speak of purchasing, while we have no means of paying for it beyond a slip of paper."

" Wait," replied Ernest ; " I shall, perhaps, have a proposition to make to you ; but, first, I wish to know whether you have consulted your friends, and if they are not disposed to make a little sacrifice to assist you in this matter."

One of the students replied, that he durst not say a word to his father, for fear of being turned out of doors ; another, that he had spoken of it to his tutor, who ridiculed him, and said it

ourselves, and travel over Germany with our violins ; we may, perhaps, succeed. Such is my advice ; if it does not please you, and you can propose a better plan, I will willingly agree to your proposition."

It was received with applause. Such an idea would be likely to please Germans. The manners of the country are such that it would be considered no degradation. Far from seeking another expedient, they assured him they could imagine nothing to be compared to it. They would see the country, they would lead a life of romance, they would earn applause, and florins also to enable them to keep their word. The project was admirable !